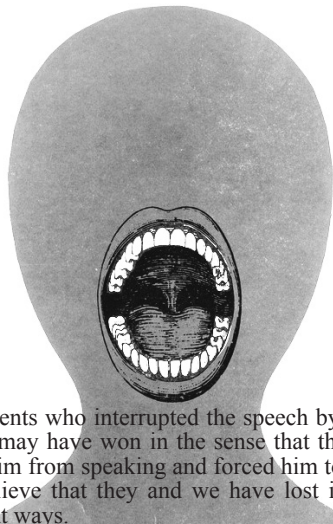


IN DEFENCE OF FREE SPEECH

COMPILED BY CAMBRIDGE DEFEND EDUCATION (25 NOV 2011)

APOLOGY FOR THE STATUS QUO, BY "NICK"

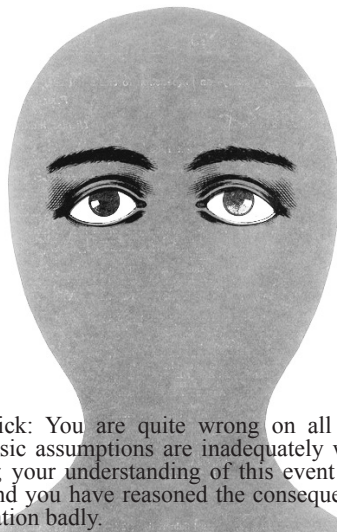
CRITIQUE OF NICK'S APOLOGY, BY "DR. N"



The students who interrupted the speech by David Willetts may have won in the sense that they prevented him from speaking and forced him to leave, but I believe that they and we have lost in more important ways.

Instead of seeing Willetts' appearance at Cambridge as an opportunity to publicly make a moral and intellectual case by asking him challenging questions with a view to exposing the flaws in his arguments, and by putting forward some of the strongest arguments for their own case, they instead chose to adopt a strategy that can be and is used just as easily by people with no justifiable case at all. By so doing, I believe that they weakened their own position by giving the impression to those present in the lecture theatre, and to those reading about what happened, that they don't actually have any strong arguments, and must therefore resort to these sorts of tactics. Chanting and bar-racking is unlikely to convert anyone to the cause, but presenting strong arguments and asking tough questions might just have done so. Merely preventing Willetts from speaking achieves nothing, as he has plenty of other platforms from which to speak, but publicly challenging him just might. Moreover, adopting such tactics is likely to both alienate and antagonise natural allies, and to harden the resolve of opponents.

However little effect challenging Willetts with strong arguments might have in the grand scheme of things, it is still more rational to persuade just one previously undecided audience member, and to give Willetts even a momentary pause for thought, than to persuade none and to alienate others instead. However unlikely, it is at least possible that creating sufficient cognitive dissonance could even lead



Dear Nick: You are quite wrong on all counts. Your basic assumptions are inadequately worked-through; your understanding of this event is deficient; and you have reasoned the consequences of the situation badly.

I am not a member of CDE. I am not sympathetic with the mainstream of the protest movement, and disagree with the official campaign stance, as I understand it, in relation to HE funding. But your argument here is absolute hogwash. It relies on an image of reasonable discourse which simply does not exist in the academic or political spheres. I've certainly very rarely heard free speech in such contexts, though I have heard it in others: between strangers in public houses, or between friends in private houses, for example. Institutions like universities do not accommodate free speech comfortably. I will return to this fundamental point later.

But let me deal with some preparatory issues. You argue that it would have been possible for the guardians of CRASSH to have engaged Willetts in discourse with "a view to exposing the flaws in his arguments". What utter nonsense that is. Do you suppose such flaws have not been previously presented to the minister? That he remains unaware that his policy is not highly regarded by HE workers and administrators? On the contrary, this exposure has already been effected, time and again, not least by supporters of CDE, not least by those students who opted to use another kind of argument at the meeting this week.

Reasonable arguments cannot succeed here. Willetts is not interested in winning an argument of that kind; indeed he is not interested in *argument* in the way that you are interested in it at all: he simply does not esteem argument as you esteem it. He is interested in only one thing — in managing his policy through Whitehall. You can't talk him

to Willetts himself modifying his position if presented with strong enough arguments. Such things can and do happen. By contrast, human nature is such that merely shouting people down will only tend to lead to their current beliefs becoming more entrenched. Therefore, the actions of the students involved were probably counterproductive and therefore irrational.

In general, in a civil democracy such as ours – however slow and flawed it might be – we all ought to encourage law and policy to be decided more by seeking democratic political agreement using such means as deliberation, rational argument, political lobbying, and public debate, rather than by the sort of direct action that merely seeks to silence public and political debate in favour of imposing the will of some group upon that of everyone else. And if some of our current processes for making and changing law and political policy are themselves imperfect, as they no doubt are, then we should seek to reform them by rational and democratic means too. This sort of method of course runs the risk that others will disagree with and outvote you, but that's part of what it is to live in a democracy. In this case it is particularly important to effectively communicate one's strongest arguments. Why should others be sympathetic to your case if they haven't agreed with or even heard your best arguments? Maybe you're not communicating them widely or effectively enough, or maybe they're just weak arguments in the first place. In this latter case, how would you even know yourself that you are right? And, moreover, even if widespread direct action was effective in forcing changes in policy and law, do you really think that law and policy should be made and changed this way in a democracy such as ours? Do you think those who shout the loudest or who can muster the greatest force or numbers should determine policy and law by those means alone, or should they ideally be based upon deliberation using the best evidence and the strongest arguments? That we don't have a perfect system now is not an argument for replacing it with a worse system.

In fact, engaging in direct action – especially if violent or destructive – can be to irrationally promote anarchy as, if such means were seen to work, then other groups might decide to follow suit and attempt to shortcut the legal and democratic process in order to get what they want too, leading to escalating violence and lawlessness. And there is abundant evidence that anarchy is not in our best interests, despite what some might mistakenly believe. In the absence of a functioning state with a monopoly on legitimate violence to enforce laws and contracts, there is plenty of evidence that wide-scale cooperation and trust will break down and lead to people and groups competing violently for

out of it. Politicians are immune to having "flaws" in argument exposed: that just isn't how argument appears to them to work, isn't what they believe argument is for. They do not behave like academics in debate; they do not behave reasonably, and cannot be reasoned with. Willetts' views, right down to his responses to sharp questions on policy, are well-known. The man hardly lacks a platform. Only the most cloth-eared participant in our higher-education culture could be unaware of Willetts' arguments, and only the most stargazing loyal Tory squire would be unable to mount his own description of its egregious opportunism, myopia, and chauvinism. His policy will not change: it's not like a research paper which we can subject to an especially swingeing peer-review. There is no super-sophisticated, high-level, "interdisciplinary" argument which we can deploy to change his heart. To entertain such fantasies is vain and self-deceiving.

I can only suppose that such fantasies vibrated in the minds of those behind the invitation which CRASSH extended to this person. As Mr Prynnne argues, having him here to speak was a disgusting manoeuvre. Willetts, who is on something of a PR drive lately, was here to supply himself and the world with an affirmatory image of exactly that kind of engagement which you believe would have had some critical consequence for him, which you believe might have done him some damage. Such an outcome, you must understand, was inconceivable. Coming to the Big University to have a bracingly reasonable discussion, and to be seen to have done so, was the entire reason for his appearance. Without this interruption to his programme, awkward and politically wonky as the content of the interruption itself necessarily was, Willetts would straightforwardly have accomplished everything he came here to do, however tricky and clever the posers mounted from the floor might have been. That is, he would have won the political argument, regardless of what was said.

The CRASSH team dull-wittedly, preeningly, and naively, offered the minister nothing other than the chance to achieve this minor triumph — for Willetts at this moment a constitutive triumph in a triumphal procession — and offered themselves and their supporters absolutely nothing in recompense: nothing at all, save to give life to their self-flattering fantasies, and cuddle up against the kind of fictions you indulge in your post: dreaming that reasonable discourse can redeem the disaster the Tories have wrought in higher education; that the university will remain nobly committed to reasonable discourse despite the ambitions of neoliberalism to demean it with filthy commerce; that reasonable discourse and free speech are the same, and so on. Absolute trash.

You argue that "presenting strong arguments and asking tough questions" would have won supporters to the CDE cause. This is absurd. Not only because CDE members routinely mount such argu-

resources, launching pre-emptive attacks upon each other, and acting violently to maintain a reputation for strength. Certainly, if one lives in an autocratic or totalitarian regime, or is part of some permanently disenfranchised minority, and one can thus play no legitimate part in the political process in one's country, then civil disobedience, direct action, and even violent revolt might be and has been historically justified – but this is far from the case here.

Education is not and cannot be free – as somebody must pay for it. The question is who? In fact, there is a strong case for significant state funding for higher education. We all ought to encourage such education since it tends promote a happier, more prosperous, more stable, and flourishing society. A more educated and enlightened populace will on the whole be more economically productive, will be more critical, and will make better decisions based upon stronger evidence and arguments – and thus truth and wisdom will be more likely to prevail. And as this is in all of our interests, we all ought to be willing to help fund it. Whilst we should rightly seek to reduce any unnecessary waste and bureaucracy within higher education, ensure that our money is being well spent, and consider at least some student contributions from those who can or will be able to afford it – since they will benefit from their education more than will those not attending – we still ought to want higher education to be properly funded and be willing to contribute towards that goal by means of state funding. By contrast, if significantly reducing public funding was to discourage many from attending university and to reduce the quality of the education on offer to those who do (and this is an empirical question, not one that can be answered from the armchair), then this would be likely to promote a more ignorant, uncritical, and irrational populace. Truth and wisdom would therefore be less likely to prevail, and society would be more unstable, less productive, and less happy and flourishing – which is not in our best interests. One only has to look around at the world to see examples of this at work.

However, instead of taking the opportunity to forcefully put these and other strong arguments to David Willetts in a public forum, the opportunity was squandered in favour of a misguided, self-indulgent, and probably counterproductive protest. However little the former would have achieved in practice, it is certainly better than the alternative that was actually chosen. Moreover, by doing this, those involved also prevented others who might have been willing and able to challenge Willetts on his policies. All in all, a sad day for rational debate in Cambridge.

“Nick”

November 24, 2011 at 12:04pm

ments in public and private spaces, and are ignored. Arguments and questions of that kind are not neglected. But we must not be squeamish about what political argument can sometimes entail. In political terms — and no other terms are meaningful when dealing with a government minister — the reality is that they *were* making a strong argument and *were* asking a tough question when they made their intervention. And neither the minister nor the university have given, or I daresay are able to give, any answer to it whatsoever. Willetts has basically behaved as though the incident never took place; the university is “monitoring the situation”. Their response has been utterly pathetic, and the moral victory for the students here is considerable.

You are disturbed by the hooligan intensity with which the protestors set out their case. But in the broader political context you must remember, and you must try to understand, that the minister, and not the students, is the aggressor. The students are fighting a defensive action with dwindling resources as the political feast moves on elsewhere. Winning broad support among the drowsy lions of the English yeomanry is not an option for them, and it would be absurd for them to conduct themselves with that aim in view. Assess this coolly, from their point of view. They prevented their opponent from winning his little triumph. They demonstrated the strength and will of their commitment, concentrating their comrades in the struggle. These are important achievements. No matter what the flimsily committed might feel; no matter that the sensible and reasonable will not support them — one might as well say, no matter that their opponents will not support them — they will continue to mount their argumentative objection, strenuously and passionately. Their argument takes considerable courage and skill to sustain, and I admire their way and kind of reasoning and arguing with all my academic heart. The consequences of their commitment should not be underestimated, nor too quickly adduced, and your dismissal of their efficacy is arrogant and shortsighted: radicalism does not lead straightforwardly or speedily to reform, and is never popular in its early stages of development. But it is surely now the only certain way forward.

These activists ought to be admired and celebrated by our whole community. They are the ones whose freedom of speech is endangered; they are the ones who risk their own liberty in order to advance the liberty of others; they are the ones who dare to speak freely in an institutional culture which has committed its power to silence them. By contrast, from the point of view of the defense of free speech, Willetts behaved abominably. There are any number of recourses for a speaker when decried. Willetts chose the worst, the weakest, and most poisonous of them: retreat. He is a pitiful excuse for a democratic politician.

He should be used to such treatment as he was offered at his lecture, after all, as a member of the

SUN 27 NOV, 6:30PM

**A NIGHT OF
MUSIC & WORDS
AGAINST THE GOVT.
WHITE PAPER ON
HIGHER EDUCATION**

**FEATURING:
SELMA JAMES
J.H. PRYNNE
& SONGS IN THE DARK**

**AT THE OCCUPIED
LADY MITCHELL HALL,
SIDGWICK SITE,
UNIV OF CAMBRIDGE**

**& DO NOT CROSS
THE PICKET LINES
ON 30 NOVEMBER!**

DR. N'S CRITIQUE CONTINUED HERE . . .

free-speaking House of Commons. Indeed the battering Willetts received was not much more derailing than that usually meted out to visiting speakers at research seminars. Admittedly, those making it impossible for the speaker to conclude her presentation are more typically senior professors, huffing and snorting, bullying their guest, grandstanding in the Q&A. So perhaps it would please you to reimagine these students as upholders of a fine Cambridge tradition: that of the indignant hosts commandeering a debate with a visiting speaker in order to mount another more to their liking.

But let me be serious, and return to my first point. What you and others like you really object to in such spectacle, whether you acknowledge it or not, is the disturbance of the order of authorised speech, not the arrest of free speech. Willetts' "freedom of speech" was in no sense denied or even challenged by the protestors. What was denied him was the authority to speak to a silent audience. That freedom, the freedom of the speaker to speak without interruption, is not what free speech means: it doesn't mean that literally, it doesn't mean that historically or morally, and it doesn't mean that in the jurisprudential discourse of civil rights. That is what authorised speech means: the power to command attention. In academic Q&A, questions are addressed to the speaker only under the provision that he can silence them by interruption, refuse them, or absent himself, at any point in the debate. There are no reasonable means of coercing an invited speaker into statement or response should he be disinclined to state, or to respond. Authorised speech founds its order on the submission of each participant to be commanded to silence by the presiding authority — the chair of discussion, or the speaker. And it was this authority to speak and to be heard, not freedom of speech, which was denied Willetts.

Free speech is, in its internal structural disposition as well as in its commonplace practise, considerably more robust, shouty, and confrontational than authorised speech. The students gave you a spectacle of that nature. I'm not in the least surprised that you didn't like it. It's an acquired taste, its savour encountered too infrequently readily to be acquired. I will stop here, though there is much more to say. You do considerable harm to the notion of freedom of speech by abusing its meaning as you do here. Personally, I'm no great admirer of it, but I've enough respect for it at least to understand what it is: and to appreciate the fact that the student protestors you condescend to despise are a vital living embodiment of that principle you believe them to have violated.

"Dr. N."

November 25, 2011 at 11:53am